TRUE RELIGION
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This Wednesday, November 11th, is Veteran's Day. It used to be called Armistice Day, because on the 11th day of the 11th month - at 11:00 A.M., in the year 1918 an Armistice was signed at Versailles which brought to an end a great and unprecedented conflict we know as the First World War. It was a modern warfare and it stunned the world with its ferocity and mechanized violence and unthinkable loss of life. It was, the American President said, "a war to make the world safe for democracy," a "war to end all war." It was called Armistice Day until we fought several more wars, renamed it Veteran's Day. As we observe it this year, young Americans are again fighting and dying, giving all they have for our country.

Some of you may remember, as I do, that Armistice Day was a school holiday. There was a parade and in the parade were aging veterans of that war that ended in 1918, with their peculiar uniforms, knickers, and field hats. At precisely 11:00 the most dramatic thing happened. The parade stopped. The bands and drums ceased playing and an unusual and holy silence descended. People standing to watch the parade stopped talking and cheering and hushed their children. Men removed their hats. Everyone bowed their heads.

And into that peculiar November silence, a lone trumpeter from each band played taps. (For several years I was that trumpeter.) We thought about those who had gone to France and had not come home. We thought, as well, about brothers and cousins, uncles and fathers who had gone to France, Belgium, Okinawa, Iwo Jima, Korea: Uncle Frank, Lieutenant Colonel Frank Buchanan, his son: my cousin Dick, South Pacific, Uncle Jack, for whom I'm named, Saipan.

We thought, for a minute or so, about them, about sacrifice, about laying your life on the line, about giving it all, giving everything you have to give.

At the end of the minute the bands started up again, people resumed talking and laughing, and life went on.

That's the way it is, I suppose. There comes a moment, often without warning, a moment of challenge and demand, when something is required

of you. It happens on the battlefield. But it also happens on the athletic field, the board room and operating room, on the streets of the city; it happens deep in your heart. What is required now is your most authentic self: everything you are, and you can't really hold anything back: you either do it or you don't.

Do you suppose she thought about it, planned ahead of time to give away her last two coins, all she had? Jesus and his friends are in the grand, impressive Temple in Jerusalem, the capital city, the symbol of h is people's historic aspirations and dreams, the heart of its religion. They have walked all the way down from Galilee, to observe the Passover. Things are going badly. Ever since all that fuss when he entered the city riding on a donkey and a crowd gathered to cheer him on, greeting him like some kind of conquering hero there had been simmering resentment, fear turning to hatred, and now talk of eliminating him. He alone seems to understand what is happening, and that all he has and is may soon be required of him.

He's teaching, in the Temple, and he warns them about ostentatious religion, elitist religion: scribes - lawyers whose profession brings t hem in contact with power and money and who love it and flaunt it, even in the Synagogue. And, to make matters worse, are preying on the weakest and most vulnerable, charging exorbitant fees for handling real estate, when a man dies and his widow needs help. Kathleen Norris points out that the God of the Bible gets very angry at things like that, the exploitation of the weak. "They will receive the greater condemnation" Jesus says, which I think means, "They'll get theirs."

It's the second story that captures our imagination. They sit down opposite the Temple Treasury: actually 13 trumpet shaped copper receptacles, each supervised by a priest, where worshippers and visitors and tourists place an offering. IT's a pretty good show actually. There is no paper currency, only coin. There is no "silent offering." The receptacles are copper. Wealthy donors either dumped a bag of coins in or opened the bag and let it fall, ricocheting, clattering. I'll bet that's what they did. I have a confession. I'd be tempted to do it.

When the magazine my college sends to all its alums arrives, I turn to the back where all the contributions and contributors are listed in categories, based on amount, to see my name and how I'm doing in comparison with my classmates. Who doesn't do it? That's why it's in there. Another confession, when I settled into my seat at Symphony Center for a concert by the Chicago Symphony, before I read the program notes I turn to the back of the program and check out how my members are doing, listed by category and size of gift.

So that's what Jesus and his disciples are doing and I think they're enjoying it. And here comes a poor widow and makes her way to the receptacle and drops in two coins - worth a penny, a coin so undervalued that we don't clutter our pockets with them anymore, leave them behind in the little dish by the cash register, don't lean over an pick one up from the sidewalk.

It's all she has and Jesus says - her gift is what this is all about - she has put in everything she has: she has given it all and that, Jesus said, is what I have been trying to teach you and am about to show you.

Now if you are chairperson of the Capital Campaign, or the Development Director, this story is turning into a fundraising nightmare. Every gift counts, of course, but if you're going to make your goal, you have to have major gifts and they have to be made publicly enough that they will encourage, inspire, stimulate and, if necessary, embarrass other capable givers. You simply have to have those who "contribute out of their abundance."

Everybody knows that. I think Jesus knows it, too. He came to the Temple to observe the rituals of Passover. He visited and taught in Synagogues. Institutions cost money. Someone is always trying to cast him in the mold of an opponent of institutional religion, suggesting that he would be, ipso facto, an opponent of church as institution. But you really can't do that. He would certainly be a critic of the church but like Robert Frost's quarrel with the world, Jesus' quarrel with the church would be a lover's quarrel.

My guess, based on nothing but observing where he in fact spent a lot of time, is that he walked up to the Temple Treasury and made his offering too.

In the final analysis, this is not about money alone, but about True Religion, Good Religion, Authentic Religion and for him it meant something like that widow giving all she had, something like an astonishing statement he made just a little time before, while they are still in Galilee: "Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it," something like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's haunting "When Christ calls a person, it is a call to come and die," which Bonhoeffer did.

At the heart of the Gospel is a radically counterintuitive idea - that you save your life, claim your life, fully live your life if you figure out a way to lose it, to give it away. It's a consistent theme in the story of Jesus. To a wealthy young man, a seeker for meaning - "Sell it all and follow me:" to disciples not quite sure who he is and what he wants of them: "save your

life and lose it: lose your life for my sake and find it." And of course, this poor widow - now a powerful symbol of the whole story, an icon through which we see the mystery and reality of a self-giving God - she gave all she had.

Counterintuitive and countercultural: a culture that, over and over, every day of our lives from morning to night, in all the media, television, newspapers, magazines, in our mail, in the increasingly thick and glossy catalogs clogging our mailboxes and the U.S. Postal Service, on the Internet, on the sides of buses, billboards and in every shop window - the culture inundates us with a promise: "Buy this and you will be happy. Buy this and you will be alive." It has the evangelical power of religion.

There was an eye-catching ad in the Sunday *New York Times Magazine* a few weeks ago - an attractive young woman in tight white jeans with high boots, a leather jacket seductively open, leaning against a gleaming Harley Davidson motorcycle. It was the two words - believe me - in large white letters across the top of the full page ad that caught my eye - "TRUE RELIGION." What preacher could resist that? I wasn't sure whether it meant the girl or the motorcycle. Turns out it is the jeans. "True Religion" is a brand of pricey jeans from $175 to $500. Nice ad. But it's not true. It's a lie.

David Myers, a social scientist, in his book, *The American Paradox: Spiritual Hunger in an Age of Plenty* observes that income increases don't seem to matter much. The doubling of affluence over the past half-century has not increased our happiness one iota.

So True Religion is not a pair of jeans, a stock portfolio. It's not what you own and consume. True Religion according to Jesus who we believe was the Christ, the very essence and truth of God, True Religion is giving your life away: giving all you have.

In her superb little book, *The Writing Life*, which is about writing but also about living, Annie Dillard writes: "One of the few things I know about writing is this: spend it all: shout it, play it, lose it all, right away, every time. Do not hoard what seems good for a later place in the book: give it: give it all: give it now. . . The impulse to save something for a better place later is the signal to spend it all. Something more will arise for later. These things fill from behind, from beneath, like well water.

"Anything you do not give freely and abundantly becomes lost to you. You open your safe and find ashes" (p. 78-79).

It was a very great honor for Fourth Presbyterian Church and for me personally to host a memorial service this fall for recipients of the

Congressional Medal of Honor who died last year. There is an organization of Medal of Honor recipients. The truth is that many Medal of Honor recipients receive the award posthumously - Sgt. First Class Jared Monti who gave his life trying to rescue a wounded comrade in Afghanistan received the Medal of Honor on September 17. But survivors have a convention every year, and this year it was in Chicago. We were asked to host the memorial service, and of course, we were honored to do so. On the morning of September 18, buses full of old soldiers and sailors, Marines and their families, pulled up on Michigan Avenue in front of the church. There was a cohort of mounted Chicago Police. An Army Honor Guard fired a twenty-one-gun salute, and young Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine men and women, in full dress uniforms, were on hand to honor the fallen.

I welcomed everyone, gave the opening prayer, and then sat down to listen as the five men who had died in the past year were remembered. All were World War II combat veterans, each having performed incredible acts of heroism, courage, and unbelievable self-sacrifice on behalf of their comrades, their families and nation:

Russell Dunham, Kayserberg, France, January 8, 1945
Robert Nett, Philippine Islands, December 14, 1944
Everett Pope, Peleliu Island, September 19, 1944
James Swett, Solomon Islands, April 4, 1943
George Wahlen, Iwo Jima, March 3, 1945

In a moment of extreme danger, each of these men, then in their late teens and early twenties, reached deep within their own hearts and decided to risk life itself, to give everything any one of us has to give, for friends, family, nation.

It was a good and holy moment to be able to say thank you to God for them.

Not many of us will have to make that particular decision, thanks be to God. But every one of us <u>does</u> make that decision in one way or another - to give our lives, all we have -

- to live for the children—our own, or our nation's children, the world's children
- to give our life to a beloved who needs us
- to give life to a school, a college, a university, a church
- to give life to some great cause that will make life more human and the world better
- to give life so that the most vulnerable will be cared for: the hungry fed, the naked clothed, the homeless sheltered

There is an invitation here - to a radical extravagance - to live your life fully, by giving it away, pouring it out with all the passion, energy, intelligence, imagination and love in you. To follow this one as he does just that, as he proceeds, with great intentionality and passion, to his cross, to give all he has.

"Look" Jesus said. "Look at her."

This is who I am.
This is what I mean.
This is what I mean for you to be.
This is how I will save your soul.

"Look" Jesus said. "Look at her - She gave all she had."

Thanks be to God.